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## Colonial Rattlesnake Lore, 1714.

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The subjoined document,<sup>1</sup> here printed for the first time, is in all likelihood the fullest account before the Nineteenth Century of the characteristics and habits of rattlesnakes. The author was a Captain Walduck (probably Thomas Walduck<sup>2</sup>), who at an earlier time had sent to his friend James Petiver,<sup>3</sup> apothecary and Fellow of the Royal Society of London, eight letters concerning the trade, government, society, and natural curiosities of Barbados.<sup>4</sup> While at Barbados he had made wistful efforts to bring himself to the attention of the Royal Society; and in his "Account of the Rattlesnake," read before the Society January 7, 1714, he achieved his ambition. From a reference in the manuscript it appears likely that Walduck sent it to Petiver from New England.

The whole paper, presented with due solemnity before the most distinguished scientific society of the time, is an extraordinary collection of folklore pertaining to a creature almost as fictitious as the basilisk, the hydra, or the unicorn. One can imagine the honest Captain, full of inquiry and thirsty for scientific glory, noting down for the Royal Society of London the mendacities of Indians and fur traders. He displays no less assiduity in this task than his distinguished contemporary, the Reverend Cotton Mather, D.D., who in 1712 had contributed snake lore to the archives of the Royal Society. Why Captain Walduck's letter was not similarly honored by inclusion in the Society's *Philosophical Transactions* is not clear; perhaps the editors doubted the authenticity of the Captain's information.

Capt Walducks Acct of y<sup>e</sup> Rattle Snake Read before  
y<sup>e</sup> Royall Society [word illegible] Jan: 7<sup>th</sup>. 171 $\frac{3}{4}$

The most pernicious Creature in y<sup>e</sup> English Empire upon y<sup>e</sup> Main of America is the Rattle Snake, as well for their Number as Effect, whose bite is as mortall as Fate, unless y<sup>e</sup> part be immediately cut out: beleiving it may not be unpleasant to you, I will describe as many of it's Qualities as I can,

<sup>1</sup> The MS. forms Number 21 (ff. 113b-116b) in Sloane MS. 3339 (British Museum), which is Volume VIII of the collections of James Petiver from 1691 to 1717, entitled *Adversaria*. See Samuel Ayscough, *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts Preserved in the British Museum* (London, 1782), II, 653; E. J. L. Scott, *Index to the Sloane Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1904), p. 556.

<sup>2</sup> Tho. Waldock was appointed Register of the Court of Admiralty for the Bahamas, February 25, 1697 (*Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series: America and West Indies*, 15 May, 1696-31 Oct., 1697, ed. J. W. Fortescue [London, 1904], p. 383). The Minutes of the Council of Barbados, March 16, 1703, refer to a lawsuit of Thomas Walduck (*Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series: America and West Indies*, Dec. 1, 1702-1703, ed. Cecil Headlam [London, 1913], pp. 265, 771).

<sup>3</sup> Petiver's name appears frequently in *Philosophical Transactions* (see particularly XXII, 795). Regarding his collections see Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to . . . Jamaica* (London), II (1725), iv-v.

<sup>4</sup> Of these the first appears to have been lost; the remaining seven are preserved in Sloane MS. 2302. The fourth is dated October 29, 1710, and the last September 17, 1712. In a letter from Barbados dated November 12, 1710, Walduck speaks of himself as having passed fourteen years in the West Indies, "and I support my self with the hopes of Seeing England once More" (Sloane MS. 2302, f. 16).

leaving y<sup>e</sup> Descriptions of its Parts to Surgeons & Anatomists. He is bred from an Egg an Inch & half long, & about y<sup>e</sup> bigness of a Mans little finger; y<sup>e</sup> Shell is of y<sup>e</sup> Colour of Parchment, & when first laid near as Tuff, & what surprized me, I found some of these Eggs once, & they hapned to be near Maturity to hatch, & I brake them with a Stick, & out ran a Snake all perfect, att least 7. inches long, & as big as a Goose-Quill, for they are quoil'd oblong in y<sup>e</sup> Shell, their head in y<sup>e</sup> middle & their Tayl on y<sup>e</sup> outside, & when they hatch y<sup>e</sup> Shell groweth dry, & they break it with their heads & come out: In Carolina & Virginia they engender in y<sup>e</sup> Month of Aprill (when y<sup>e</sup> Sun is near y<sup>e</sup> Tropick of Cancer, & warms y<sup>e</sup> Earth, & vivifies those dead Animalls buried in y<sup>e</sup> Winter) for a fortnight or 3 weeks together: In New-England & Pensylvania not untill May, or June; when they [*folio* 114] engender some Thousands of them gott together (I heard a man say he saw a heap as big as a hhd) some flying about others hissing & making a horrible noise, in a strange permiscuous manner—And this to me obviates a vulgar Opinion that there is a king among y<sup>e</sup> Snakes, in whose head is a Carbuncle that shines in y<sup>e</sup> night with wonderfull Lustre, & this is only y<sup>e</sup> Agrigation of their Eyes, by such a number getting together, their Spirits being high & volatile & full of venom, that by y<sup>e</sup> Reflection of water, or some such Accident gives such a light in y<sup>e</sup> Night as Travellers love to report) a little time after they lay their Eggs at y<sup>e</sup> Roots of dry Trees, amongst leaves & dry moss, where y<sup>e</sup> heat of y<sup>e</sup> Sun & Earth vivifies & hatches them, & in August young Snakes have been seen; their Eggs are laid like a chain 8. 10. 12. together if they lay but once or oftner is uncertain: at a year old they have a Rattle in their Tayls, & about 2 foot long & as bigg as a Mans thumb, & then they come to be deadly poysonous, so they shall grow to be 8. 10. 12 foot long & as bigg as a Mans thigh, & every year increases a Rattle (some believe they grow like y<sup>e</sup> Alligator as long as they live) there have been some kill'd with 24 Rattles in them, & it is beleived they do not exceed that age, they live upon Squirrells & all sorts of Birds that they can catch, & by a wonderfull Facination they shall charm them, both Squirrells & Birds into their mouths, from y<sup>e</sup> Top of a Tree 50 foot high, for they are a Slothfull heavy Creature (to other Snakes) otherways they could not gett their prey, they swallow all whole, for their bite is as deadly to themselves as to those they bite, as soon as they bite they apply themselves to a certain Root w:<sup>ch</sup> they eat & is an Antidote to their own poyson, by y<sup>e</sup> want of which they shall dye in an houres time by their own poyson [*y<sup>e</sup> Indians* [*folio* 114*b*]] & some of y<sup>e</sup> English that trade amongst y<sup>e</sup> Indians know this Root & keep it always about them, & when they are bitt, they chew this Root & apply it to y<sup>e</sup> wound, by w:<sup>ch</sup> means y<sup>e</sup> Poyson will be expelled: y<sup>e</sup> Indians likewise have another Notion, or rather a peice of superstition as a Remedy ag.<sup>t</sup> y<sup>e</sup> bite of y<sup>e</sup> R: Snake that by painting a R: Snake upon their Bodies, they beleive y<sup>e</sup> Rattle Snake will not bite them, & several both Indians, & White men have Snakes drawn with black strokes most curiously upon their bodies: We may Quest:<sup>n</sup> whither this might not be taken from y<sup>e</sup> brazen serpent in y<sup>e</sup> Wilderness, & handed down to them by Tradition, or whither there might not be some Magick in it, for all Diabolical Magick came from Natural Magick (as all Idolatry is a Corruption of y<sup>e</sup> true Religion), as soon as they bite they run away, & they never bite but once, y<sup>e</sup> Experiment of their killing themselves by their own bite hath been tryed thus: An Indian hath been hired to bring in a Rattle snake (for there be some of them, & white men too, that will take up a Rattle snake as one would take up an Eel, & it hath been put into a Cask standing up with one head out, & y<sup>e</sup> Snake hath been provok'd by a stick to bite y<sup>e</sup> Stick, which it hath done, but could not be provoked to bite y<sup>e</sup> 2d time, & in an hour after hath died for want of this Root. Another Experiment of y<sup>e</sup> virulence of its Poyson hath been this a Snake hath been confined as above & by green switches their Rind being pealed off, y<sup>e</sup> Snake hath been provoked to bite y<sup>e</sup>

end of y<sup>e</sup> switch, & y<sup>e</sup> poyson hath been observed to run up y<sup>e</sup> switch, & turned y<sup>e</sup> green of y<sup>e</sup> switch [*folio* 115] to a blackness all y<sup>e</sup> way up to y<sup>e</sup> Top, this hath been tryed some score of times by several hands, & it is y<sup>e</sup> Nature of y<sup>e</sup> Poyson to ascend; for if a man be bitt by y<sup>e</sup> Snake in y<sup>e</sup> Arm, or Leg, lett him hold that part up higher than his body he shall live some days, but if it be below he shall not live 2 houres, but their body shall break full of large Chapps, & Crakks as if their Skinn had been roasted by y<sup>e</sup> Fire. The R. Snake cannot bite running, he must be quoiled round with his head in y<sup>e</sup> middle & then he will rise as high as his navel, & no higher & so chop to bite, Dogs that are used to them shall make them kill themselves by running round & baying at them, that by chopping att y<sup>e</sup> Dogg they have bitt themselves. Their Poyson lieth in som little bladder att y<sup>e</sup> Root of their two lower Tusks, which when they bite breaks & is squeaz'd out, & their is two socketts in their upper jaw to receive them, they never make use of them in their ordinary feeding but swallow all whole, their Stomach's are of a large Capacity young Fauns being taken out whole. The Indians never are in fear of them, nor will they be perswaded to kill any of them. The Indians believe that y<sup>e</sup> R. Snakes are y<sup>e</sup> Executors of y<sup>e</sup> Divine Vengeance, & that he that is bitt by them hath been a Murrerer, w:<sup>ch</sup> likewise was the Opinion of y<sup>e</sup> Inhabitants of Maltha when S:<sup>t</sup> Paul was shipwrek'd there according to y<sup>e</sup> sacred Text. Indeed they never do bite but when provoked, & a Man may as securely sleep in y<sup>e</sup> wood for them as in a feather bed. [*folio* 115*b*] They never bite but first make a Rattling with their tayls, & they may be heard 20 yards of. Those Men y<sup>t</sup> use y<sup>e</sup> Woods say they never come near a R. Snake but they are aprised of it before they either hear or see them, & they are in a fright as tho' a Spectre was near them, & that their breath inflames y<sup>e</sup> Air & before they either hear or see them they are seized with sorrow. So that y<sup>e</sup> Fiction of Phyton is verif'y'd in y<sup>e</sup> Rattle Snake, or they are all one Creature, they are locked up all y<sup>e</sup> Winter in y<sup>e</sup> Earth, & when they first come forth in y<sup>e</sup> Spring they are weak & have lost all their Stock of poyson, & their bite is of no danger, untill by feeding & warm weather they are supply'd with fresh venom, & in a Month's time their bite shall become Mortall, & their venom is deadly lett it be lodg'd any where so long as y<sup>e</sup> Snake lives but not longer Experienced by y<sup>e</sup> Following History: A Man in Virginia being in y<sup>e</sup> Woods having a pair of boots on was bitt by a RSnake thro' his boot came home to his wife & dyed, his Boots were hung up in y<sup>e</sup> house, & his widow marryed a second husband, who putt on those Boots, & by rideing a Small Journey complain'd with a pain in his Leg & likewise dyed, the Boots were hung up again, & y<sup>e</sup> Woman married y<sup>e</sup> third Husband, who made use of y<sup>e</sup> same Boots, & y<sup>e</sup> first time of wearing them complained as y<sup>e</sup> former of a small tumor in his legg & likewise died; Upon this y<sup>e</sup> Surgeon cutts y<sup>e</sup> boot in peices & found y<sup>e</sup> Tooth of y<sup>e</sup> Rattle Snake that bitt y<sup>e</sup> first Husband, & did all y<sup>e</sup> Execution since as small as a hair, they took it out with a [*folio* 116] pair of Forceps, & prick'd a dog with it that within few hours dyed, y<sup>e</sup> Surgeon took y<sup>e</sup> tooth some time after tryed it upon another Dog & it did him no hurt, & it was supposed then y<sup>e</sup> Snake was dead. Wherever y<sup>e</sup> English come & settle y<sup>e</sup> Snakes leave y<sup>e</sup> place in a little time, which keeps up y<sup>e</sup> superstition of y<sup>e</sup> Indians that there is some extraordinary virtue in y<sup>e</sup> English, when I can conceive no other Reason in it but by planting & weeding y<sup>e</sup> Earth, plowing & breaking up y<sup>e</sup> glebe, they eradicate y<sup>e</sup> Root out of y<sup>e</sup> Ground that is y<sup>e</sup> Antidote & self preservation to y<sup>e</sup> Snake against his own poyson, & therefore they are forced to leave y<sup>e</sup> place & go where it is to be found. They are not all over America, not to y<sup>e</sup> Southward of y<sup>e</sup> Tropick & to y<sup>e</sup> Norward of 55°, whither y<sup>e</sup> heat destroys them in one & y<sup>e</sup> Cold in y<sup>e</sup> other I am not Judge, there is none in y<sup>e</sup> Kingdom of Mexico amongst y<sup>e</sup> Spaniards, but they say they were once all over there & drove away by y<sup>e</sup> prayers of one of their Fryers; this is one of their Legends. We may say y<sup>e</sup>

same thing 100 years hence in N. England, a Man may live there 20 Years now & not see one, & in some Ages a RSnake will be as great a Rarity in N. England as a Wolf is now in Old England, tho' they were once very populous in each Country. There be Water R. Snakes as well as Land & as deadly in some Rivers in Virginia they shall creep up y<sup>e</sup> Calles of Shipps, & assault a boat when near y<sup>e</sup> Shore. there's abundance of Strange Reptiles in y<sup>e</sup> Woods in Virginia & Carolina Viper about 2 foot long more deadly than y<sup>e</sup> R. S. [*folio 116b*] but not so Common, & for whose bite y<sup>e</sup> Indians themselves know no remedy, & of which they stand very much in fear, there be likewise in y<sup>e</sup> Woods of Carolina Snakes made like a Coach whip as long & as small, that will twist their head round a horse's Leg, & with their Tayl Lash a horse with great Violence untill y<sup>e</sup> blood comes, there is like wise a Glass Snake about 2 foot long, & as green & as brittle as Glass, that if they happen to fall off a bough they will break as short as glass, & with a little switch it is more easye to break one of them than a Tobacco pipe, & what adds to y<sup>e</sup> Wonder they never bleed.

This is what I have learned (having particularly enquired) of y<sup>e</sup> Indians, & white Men conversant & Tradeing amongst y<sup>e</sup> Indians, & beleive most of this is Matter of Fact.